

Work–Family Conflict for Employees in an East Asian Airline: Impact on Career and Relationship to Gender

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This article contributes to the limited research on the conflict between work and family demands experienced by women in East Asia.

It focuses, in particular, on the impact of work–family conflict on women's organizational careers. The article reports the findings of a case study of 'East Asian Airlines' (EAA), a flagship company located in Hong Kong. The case study employed questionnaire and in-depth interview surveys that included both women and men. The study found a sharp decrease in the number of women, especially women with families, in EAA's higher grades. Indeed, women were absent from the top grades. This finding, coupled with the finding that men with dependent children had relatively greater experience of work–family conflict, suggests that this sharp decrease may be due to women with family responsibilities quitting EAA employment. Alternatively, this decrease may be due to women lowering their career ambitions and not seeking promotion to higher grades in anticipation of intolerable work–family conflict if they pursue ardently their organizational careers. The study compares and contrasts work–family conflict experiences of women in EAA with those reported for women in the West, and assesses the impact of differences between eastern and western societies in terms of the perception of women's role at work and in society, societal emphasis on equal opportunities and availability of help for domestic duties.

Keywords: career ambition, Chinese culture, family-friendly policies, gender, work–family conflict

Introduction: Work–Family Conflict in the West and in East Asia

There has been extensive research in western countries, such as the UK and the USA, demonstrating the existence of work–family conflict and its adverse effects on women, both at work and in the home; see, for example, the work by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), Pleck (1985), Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1986), Voydanoff (1987), Hall and Richter (1988), Burke (1989) and Galinsky and Stein (1990). In contrast, relatively little research has been attempted on this topic in East Asian countries. Recent noteworthy studies of work–family conflict in East Asia include the following: a comparison of employees located in manufacturing companies in China and the USA by Yang et al. (2000); a survey of Japanese working women by Matsui et al. (1995); a study of married women in Malaysia by Ahmad (1996); a survey of men and women professionals in Singapore by Chan et al. (2000); a survey of three groups of professional workers by Chiu (1998) and a survey of married women employees by Aryee et al. (1999), both located in Hong Kong; a survey of married middle-class women in South Korea by Park and Liao (2000); and a survey of employees in Taiwan by Lu (1999). To these we add the interesting earlier study of married professional women in Singapore by Aryee (1992). However, much of this research is concerned with linking work–family conflict with life satisfaction, job satisfaction and work and home stressors of various kinds. Very little attention is paid in these studies to the differing impact of work–family conflict on women's abilities and ambitions to climb the organizational hierarchy. Since women in East Asia are still failing to reach higher organizational levels despite their increasing participation in the formal employment sector,¹ we argue that there is a strong need for research in East Asian locations on women's experiences of work–family conflict and on the impact of such experiences on women's organizational careers. To begin filling this research gap, we undertook an exploratory study of the work–family conflict experienced by women ground staff in an airline company whose headquarters were located in Hong Kong.² The case study company – which we call East Asia Airlines (EAA) – is an international airline with a major presence in Hong Kong and offers scheduled passenger and cargo services to 48 cities in five continents.

In undertaking this study, we took account of a number of differences between women's lives in western societies and Chinese

societies such as Hong Kong, differences that were likely to impact on experiences of work–family conflict. As Yang et al. (2000: 114) succinctly express it, ‘Work and family pressures reflect social expectations and are most susceptible to values, beliefs, and role-related self-conceptualisations internalised through socialisation.’ Perhaps the most important factor leading to differences in women’s work lives between western countries and Hong Kong is the cultural perception of the role of women at work and in society. In traditional Chinese society, more so than in the West, women were consigned to a subordinate role that included greater responsibility for child-care and for the care of elderly parents (Jackson, 1980; Tien, 1986; Bond, 1991; Cheng and Liao, 1994). Although Chinese culture has undergone significant modification in present-day Hong Kong, many of the traditional values are perpetuated, though in weaker forms, through familial socialization (Fosh et al., 1999). While the territory embraced, from the 1970s onwards, an intense form of pragmatic capitalism, its present post-transition society retains strong elements of a familistic collectivism in which individuals identify with their families’ interests and well-being, and this identification is linked, in turn, to the persistence of gendered attitudes and roles in work organizations, including the assumption that a woman, where necessary, will sacrifice her career ambitions for her husband and family (Lau, 1984; de Leon and Ho, 1994; Fosh et al., 1999).

A second factor leading to differences in women’s work-lives between western countries and Hong Kong that may affect experiences of work–family conflict is the societal emphasis on equal opportunities. The Hong Kong government has not laid as much stress on equal opportunities as have governments in the West. Thus, while Hong Kong has specific equal opportunity (EO) employment provisions,³ the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) and the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FSDO) were passed at a relatively late date, in 1995 and 1997 respectively. Many Hong Kong employers, unlike their counterparts in the UK and US, are still not conversant with the EO concept. Related to governmental stance is the extent of public concern for equal opportunities for women. In Hong Kong, there is much less public concern about women’s opportunities than in the West and women’s groups are accorded less influence. Also note that, while in the UK and Australia, and to a lesser extent in the US, worker representative bodies have had a significant influence in persuading employers to adopt equal opportunities policies and procedures, such bodies are

weaker in Hong Kong and consequently have less influence on employers.

A third factor worth mentioning, in considering differences in women's work-lives between western countries and Hong Kong, is the availability of help for domestic duties. Help from relatives, especially for the care of children, is more frequently available in Chinese societies than in western ones, reflecting the greater emphasis on family obligations in Chinese culture – the flip-side of this being the much greater duty to care for ageing parents. In addition, there are large numbers of foreign domestic workers employed in Hong Kong – this is reflected in the much lower level of female part-time working (Ng and Chiu, 1999). Hong Kong's foreign domestic workers, usually from the Philippines, tend to live in and to undertake childcare, cooking, shopping and cleaning duties. Most middle-class Hong Kong families can afford maids, in sharp contrast to the situation in the West (for example in the UK), where such domestic help is much more expensive.

The focus of our study of EAA was on the impact of women ground staff's experiences of work-family conflict in the airline on their ability and ambition to climb the organizational hierarchy and, indeed, on their very survival in the organization's employment. The distribution of women and men in EAA was uneven: men dominated the higher levels of the company. We were interested in the extent to which the linkages between experiences of work-family conflict, gender, marital and family statuses, level of ambition, informal work culture, organizational family-friendly policies and degree of social support could explain this distribution. We were also interested in applicability to an East Asian society of the relationships established in western studies between the amelioration of work-family conflict and strong social support systems (Beehr, 1985; Ganster et al., 1986; Fusilier et al., 1987; Frone et al., 1991; Parasuraman et al., 1992). We acknowledge that a combination of factors in EAA undoubtedly accounted for the lack of women at the top of the hierarchy. Women's careers are limited in organizations not only by their domestic responsibilities but also by managerial decisions, and studies in the West have identified those that impede women's upward progress.⁴ Senior management in EAA was keen to increase the numbers of women in managerial grades – indeed, the then managing director invited the research to be undertaken – and considerable progress had been made recently

in increasing the number of women at middle management level, although there were no women yet in the top grades. The main barrier to women's progress in EAA was senior management's tendency towards 'gender blindness' instead of 'gender sensitivity'. Thus senior management presumed that there were no differences between men and women employees and that its role was to oversee 'fair' competition. This presumption meant that inter alia senior management failed to realize the impact on employees' careers of its view that extended experience of working in other countries was essential for promotion into senior positions: the acquisition of such experience was a severe problem for those with family responsibilities, who were more likely to be women. However, we feel that, given the lack of research in East Asia on women's organizational careers, a strong focus on the impact of work–family conflict in our article was justified. Such a focus also allowed us space to exhibit our rich descriptive data derived from the in-depth interview survey that accompanied our self-completed questionnaire survey. We hope that our study fills part of the gap in research on work–family conflict in East Asian contexts.

We adopted a case study approach as we wished to move away from the acontextual general attitude surveys so predominant in studies of women at work in East Asian locations and as we wished to consider the amelioration/exacerbation of women's work–family conflict by organizational policies and work culture. We looked at experiences of work–family conflict for both genders, since we considered that stresses at work highlighted by women employees might also be of concern to their male counterparts. Indeed, research has shown that work–family conflict affects both men and women (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Pleck, 1985; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1986; Voydanoff, 1987; Burke, 1989). While western research suggests that work–family conflict is felt strongest by women as they tend to do more in the family home (Lewis and Cooper, 1988; Hall and Richter, 1988; White et al., 1992), we question whether women's and men's experiences of work–family conflict exhibit the same differences in East Asian societies, where affordable domestic help is more readily available and where family members are under greater social obligation to help with each other's childcare.

In terms of a definition of work–family conflict, we adopted that used by Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1994: 213): work–family

conflict occurs when individuals' two life roles, one within the workplace and one within the family, are mutually incompatible such that participation in one role makes participation difficult in the other. More specifically, two types of work-family conflict can be identified – time-based conflict and strain-based conflict. Time-based conflict is experienced when the time devoted to one role makes it difficult to fulfil the requirements of the other role, whereas strain-based conflict is experienced when the strain produced in one role spills over into the other role. Critical work factors leading to stress transference from work to home can be role ambiguity, role overload and career frustrations, while critical factors leading to stress transference from home to work can be marital and children problems, and debts (Brief et al., 1981).

In terms of a definition of social support, we adopted that used by Shumaker and Brownell (1984: 13): 'an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient'. Support can be tangible and it can be emotional (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994: 216–17). Tangible support includes the provision of information, advice, suggestions as well as aid in the form of time and money. Emotional support includes the provision of esteem, affection and trust, as well as feedback and affirmation. Support can be provided in employees' work domain by significant others such as supervisors, colleagues, subordinates and by their employing organization, and in the employees' home domain by significant others such as spouse, children, other relatives, friends and neighbours. Such support can mitigate both time-based conflict and strain-based conflict. Organizational support for employees with family responsibilities has both formal and informal aspects. Formal organizational support can be supplied by the introduction of family-friendly practices that afford the opportunity successfully to integrate personal, work, marital and family roles (Cattaneo et al., 1994: 23). Policy changes recommended in the West to ease work-family conflict include assistance with childcare and care of elders, flexible hours, provision of opportunities to work part-time with career opportunities and benefits, career breaks and enhanced maternity, paternity and family leave (Cooper and Lewis, 1993). The organization's culture can offer informal support to employees.

The Research Problem: The Uneven Distribution of Women and Men in EAA

Table 1 shows the distribution of women and men employees in EAA at the time of the study, both horizontally and vertically.⁵ It is readily apparent that, although 65 percent of employees at EAA were women, women outnumbered men only in Grade A. In Grade B, the proportion of women dropped to just under half and in Grade C to 8 percent. In Grade D, middle management level, the proportion of women was just 3 percent and there were no women at all at the senior management levels (Grades E and Z). It is also obvious from Table 1 that employment at EAA is occupationally segregated by gender with, for example, very few women pilots but many women cabin crew. However, this article focuses on examining the vertical segregation of women ground staff and the decrease in the proportion of women as organizational grade increases. Table 1 shows that women formed 61 percent, 38 percent, 23 percent and 15 percent of the ground staff in Grades A, B, C and D respectively.

In this article, we attempt to answer the following specific research questions (RQs). RQs 1–4 are answered in the main body of the text and RQ5 in the concluding discussion.

RQ1: How is the distribution of women and men ground staff between EAA's grades related to their being married and their having children?

RQ2: What degree of work–family conflict is experienced by men and women ground staff in EAA's higher and lower grades?

RQ3: Do women and men ground staff differ in their level of ambition to climb EAA's hierarchy, and how are differences in ambition related to work–family conflict?

RQ4: To what extent is any stress in balancing work and family demands experienced by EAA ground staff ameliorated by EAA's formal adoption of family-friendly policies and its informal culture, and by the support of significant others in employees' work and home domains?

RQ5: How do the answers obtained from our RQs 1, 2, 3 and 4 compare with those of studies published in the West of women's experience of work–family conflict and its impact on their organizational careers?

TABLE 1
Distribution of Male and Female Employees at EAA (1 December 1998)

Grade	Cabin Crew		Cockpit Crew		Ground Staff		Total		All
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
A	4537	481	0	0	1548	974	6085	1455	7540
B	380	36	10	190	325	536	715	762	1477
C	0	0	2	609	71	238	73	847	920
D	0	0	0	476	17	95	17	571	588
E	0	0	0	2	0	35	0	37	37
Z	0	0	0	1	0	8	0	9	9
Total	4917	517	12	1278	1961	1886	6890	3681	10,571

Note: Data supplied by EAA.

Methodology

The fieldwork on which this article is based consists of a self-completed questionnaire survey and an in-depth interview survey. The questionnaire survey was conducted in May 1999. We selected a random sample of 187 EAA ground staff, controlling for both gender and grade. These respondents were sent a 12-page, mainly pre-coded, questionnaire. The overall response rate was 75 percent: of the 141 respondents, 78 were women and 63 men, and 72 were A/B Grades and 67 C/D Grades. Of the male respondents, 71 percent were Chinese, 27 percent were European, North American, Australian or from New Zealand and 2 percent were mixed race. The corresponding figures for the female respondents were 91 percent and 6 percent. In addition, 3 percent of the female respondents were from other East Asian countries.

We followed up the questionnaire survey with in-depth interviews with 15 women and 15 men selected from the questionnaire respondents in order to represent staff with different attributes – the most important for this analysis being ethnicity, grade, marital status and having one or more dependent children.⁶ The in-depth interviews were concerned to explore respondents' experiences of work–family conflict, degree of ambition, enjoyment of social support and opinions on supportiveness of EAA's informal workplace culture for those with family responsibilities. The interview schedule consisted largely of open-ended, exploratory questions. The interviews were conducted in English or Cantonese according to the preference of the interviewee and were tape-recorded.⁷ We also interviewed a number of members of the personnel department.

Findings

RQ1: How Is the Distribution of Women and Men Ground Staff between EAA's Grades Related to their Being Married and their Having Children?

The impact of marital and familial roles on women's progression up the organization ladder can be assessed by analysing the marital and parental statuses of the respondents in the questionnaire survey. Table 2 gives the questionnaire findings for respondents' marital status and their having one or more children, and shows that men

in Grades C/D are much more likely to be married than those men in Grades A/B (87 percent compared to 45 percent). The measure of association for men between grade and marital status was .44 (phi) and this difference was highly significant. Men in Grades C/D were also more likely to have one or more children than men in Grades A/B (67 percent compared to 16 percent). The measure of association (phi) for men between grade and having children was relatively high at .52 and this difference was also highly significant. This seems logical, given that the men in Grades C/D were older than those in Grades A/B.⁸ The picture for women was different. The women in Grades C/D, despite their being older than women in Grades A/B,⁹ were not that much more likely to be married (72 percent compared to 68 percent) and were not much more likely to have one or more children (42 percent compared to 29 percent). Indeed, Table 2 shows that, while women in the lower grades were more likely to be married and to have children than men at the same grades, women in the higher grades were as likely as men in the same grades to be married and less likely than men to have family responsibilities. This distribution suggests that the body of women in EAA experienced a different career progression pattern than the body of men in EAA.

In discussing our answers to the RQs, we attempt to explain this odd distribution of marital and parental statuses. In particular, we

TABLE 2
Marital Status and Number of Children, by Grade and by Gender for EAA
Questionnaire Respondents (Questionnaire Survey)

	Grade A/B %	Grade C/D %	All %	phi
Women – living with spouse	68 (28)	72 (26)	70 (54)	–
Men – living with spouse	45 (14)	87 (27)	66 (41)	.44**
Women – having one or more children	29 (12)	42 (15)	35 (27)	–
Men – having one or more children	16 (5)	67 (21)	42 (26)	.52**

Note: The numbers in brackets are the absolute numbers. χ^2 (with correction for continuity) was used to test the level of significance.

† $p > .10$; * $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

look at two explanations, which possibly act at the same time. These are: (1) some women with family burdens drop out from EAA employment before they progress to Grades C/D on account of the conflict they experience between their family and work demands; (2) some women, who presently have family burdens or who expect to have family burdens in the future, stay in EAA employment but lower their ambitions in anticipation of the work–family conflict that they might experience if they pursued their careers vigorously, and thus do not seek to enter higher EAA grades.

RQ2: What Degree of Work–Family Conflict is Experienced by Men and Women Ground Staff in EAA’s Higher and Lower Grades?

We look at EAA employees’ work–family conflict from two perspectives in an attempt to answer RQ2. Women and men respondents’ general opinions on the impact of work–family conflict on women’s chances of climbing the organizational hierarchy set the scene within which we can consider women’s and men’s assessment of their own degree of comfort in balancing their work and family demands.

General opinions on the impact of work–family conflict on women’s careers. There were four agree/disagree statement questions in the questionnaire survey that can be utilized to assess the respondents’ opinions on the impact of work–family conflict on women’s careers. These are: ‘Women should not combine career and motherhood’; ‘Women put family before work’; ‘Childcare responsibility significantly reduces women’s opportunities at work’; and ‘Women’s careers hit a glass ceiling in most organizations’. Table 3, which sets out the respondents’ opinions on these statements, makes it clear that both women and men felt that, while it was legitimate for women to aspire to a career, their chances of success were restricted by family demands/expectations. Thus, large proportions of both women and men disagreed with the suggestion that women should not combine a career and motherhood, but agreed with the suggestions that women put family before work and that childcare responsibility significantly reduced women’s opportunities at work. The latter two findings fit well with the respondents’ view that women’s careers hit a glass ceiling in most organizations. However, it is interesting to note that, whereas two-thirds of women respondents

TABLE 3
Opinions on Impact of Work–Family Conflict on Women’s Careers and Assessment
of their Own Comfort in Balancing Work and Family, by Gender
(Questionnaire Survey)

	Women %	Men %	All %	phi
Disagree that ‘Women should not combine career and motherhood’	74 (53)	70 (35)	72 (88)	–
Agree that ‘Women put family before work’	65 (49)	61 (31)	64 (80)	–
Agree that ‘Childcare responsibility significantly reduces women’s opportunities at work’	69 (49)	71 (41)	70 (90)	–
Agree that ‘Women’s careers hit a glass ceiling in most organizations’	66 (42)	34 (15)	53 (57)	.31*
Feel comfortable about balancing work and family demands	82 (47)	70 (52)	76 (99)	–

Note: The numbers in brackets are the absolute numbers. χ^2 (with correction for continuity) was used to test the level of significance.

† $p > .10$; * $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

agreed with this last statement, only a third of men respondents did so: the measure of association (phi) between gender and agreement with this view was relatively moderate at .31 (the difference was highly significant).

Women’s and men’s perceptions of their own degree of work–family conflict. Table 3 shows that a large proportion of both female and male respondents in the questionnaire survey stated that they felt comfortable in balancing their work and family demands. However, the in-depth interview material gave us the opportunity to explore in greater depth women and men interviewees’ experiences of work–family conflict. Table 4, compiled from the in-depth interview material, clearly shows that a number of men, particularly men with families, admitted to suffering some degree of stress in balancing work and family demands. Thus, three men stated that they

experienced a considerable degree of stress and a further five stated that they experienced some degree of stress.¹⁰ Note that all three men who suffered a high degree of stress had one or more dependent children and that four out of the five who experienced some stress also had such children. Only one man with a dependent child reported that he experienced little or no work–family conflict. In contrast, the women interviewees reported less experience of work–family conflict.¹¹ As can be seen in Table 4, only two women reported a high stress level in balancing work and family

TABLE 4
Experiences of Work–Family Conflict, by Gender and by Family Burden
(Interview Survey)

	Little or No Stress	Some Stress	High Stress
Men interviewees			
(i) Low family burden	Martin Richie Darren Robert Harry William	Edward	
(ii) High family burden	<i>Danny</i>	<i>Mike</i> <i>David</i> <i>Dennis</i> <i>Stevie</i>	<i>Lennie</i> <i>Jason</i> <i>Jimmie</i>
Women interviewees			
(iii) Low family burden	Helga Suzie Lianne Jenny Melanie Linda Bridget Renee		
(iv) High family burden	<i>Katie</i> <i>Dorothy</i> <i>Maisie</i> <i>Amy</i>	<i>Veronica</i>	<i>Angela</i> <i>Grace</i>

Note: Italicization denotes interviewee had one or more dependent children. High family burden was defined as having one or more dependent children aged under 16 years and/or over 16 years but still in full-time education. Amy was included as having a dependent child on the grounds that she was pregnant at the interview.

demands and only one reported some degree of stress in doing this. All three women had one or more dependent children. Four women with dependent children reported little or no experience of work–family conflict.¹²

We include some quotations from our in-depth interviewees in order to illustrate our findings. The first three quotations are from interviewees who experienced work–family conflict. First, we listen to Lennie, who is in Grade B, married and has one child under seven years and one child between seven and 15 years. Second, we listen to David, who is higher in EAA's hierarchy, in Grade D. He is married and has two children aged between seven and 15 years. Third, we listen to Grace. She is Grade C, married and has one child under seven years. All three were local Chinese.

[What causes you stress?] Travelling time and also as the children grow up. I feel my wife also wants me to spend more time taking care of the children, especially on their schoolwork and also spending some time playing with the children. I travel quite a long distance from my home to work. Every day I spend about three hours coming to work and returning home, so not so much time for me to do anything at home, sometimes I feel quite stressed, yes. (Lennie)

I am putting too much emphasis on getting my project done on time and managed. Maybe I am concentrating too hard on a specific issue to ensure that I really understand it and that I am really happy and satisfied with the resolution of each issue. Therefore I have been spending quite a lot time in the office as a rule and got in early and left [late] so not leaving sufficient time for my family and have begun to realize [I should] look after my family life. [I'm] especially feeling a bit guilty because of the little time I have these days with the family. My two children are growing up and later on when I have time then it'll be too late, I think, because when they grow up they won't know me. That is the kind of regret [I feel]. (David)

After we moved to the new airport, I spent two-and-a-half hours more on travelling. . . . Not much time is left. [I have] a live-in maid and my mother also helps to look after the children but my mother is close to 70 already and cannot take sole care of my children. Yet the maid also gives me very much stress because she is not able to do what we expected she would be able to do. Safety, for example, she is not very conscious [of this] and sometimes my child is being exposed to danger. Also, due to the distance from home, no matter what kind of emergency happens, we may not be there to help: that is another stress. (Grace)

We now turn to look at some typical quotations from interviewees who appeared to have achieved success in balancing their work and

home lives. First we hear from Maisie. She is Grade C, married, has one child under seven and is local Chinese. Second we hear from William. He is British and a high-flyer at Grade D. He is married but has no children. He anticipates that having children will not cause him and his wife acute work–family conflict, as his wife will look after the children full-time.

I think right now I can manage it fairly well. My son is still small, he's only six. He's still in a kindergarten. . . . I'm fairly fortunate because my husband is helping me and also I've got a really good maid. She's very close to my son. I can spend a lot of time at work and during weekends – normally I will spend most of my time with my son so it's balancing out quite well. . . . Once in a while his school will ask me to attend some activities and I will say 95 percent of the time I can make it as I will take a day's leave and I will try as much as possible to attend. He has been in kindergarten for three years already and during the whole three years there's only once I've missed out on his activities. I think I'm quite a good mother. (Maisie)

I wouldn't say stressful is the right word [when talking about balancing work and family demands]; it's a question of how you accommodate your time and achieve your work targets and reserve enough time to do the things that you want to spend [doing in your] home life. [Anticipated work–family conflict if he had children?] At present my partner has just given up her job, with the idea of moving onto something else, but I think she would very much believe if we were to have children, she would prefer to be looking after children rather than be working, and that would be very much her choice. (William)

In summary, for RQ2 our questionnaire survey found that both men and women, but particularly women, felt competing work and family demands held back women's careers but, when we looked at experiences of work–family conflict in the in-depth interviews, the men appeared to be the more stressed group: over half of the men interviewees expressed some degree of stress and all of these had dependent children. These findings, combined with the diminishing proportions of women in EAA's higher grades (as set out in Table 1), suggest that a significant proportion of women EAA employees with high family burdens, and correspondingly high experience of work–family conflict, may in fact quit EAA, leading to fewer numbers of women ground staff progressing to Grades C/D and beyond. In contrast, men with high family burdens continue in employment while experiencing high levels of work–family conflict, though they were somewhat reluctant to express this in the questionnaire.

RQ3: Do Women and Men Ground Staff Differ in their Level of Ambition to Climb EAA's Hierarchy, and How are Differences in Ambition Related to Work–Family Conflict?

As well as considering whether the lower numbers of women in Grades C/D among EAA ground staff are accounted for by women leaving prematurely, we need to consider whether another reason for this uneven distribution might be women's lowering their ambitions in anticipation of intolerable work–family conflict in higher grades.

Table 5 summarizes the questionnaire survey's findings on the differences between women's and men's ambitions. Overall, the majority of both men and women did not appear to be strongly driven by ambition to move up EAA's hierarchy. However, a larger proportion of men than of women classified themselves as 'very ambitious'. Furthermore, those respondents who were highly ambitious for their long-term careers were more likely to be men than women. Thus, the difference between men and women was most marked in terms of their plans for their position in ten years' time, whereas, in the short term, both groups had about the same

TABLE 5
Career Ambitions by Gender (Questionnaire Survey)

	Women %	Men %	All %	phi
Classified themselves as 'very ambitious' career-wise	8 (6)	27 (17) ^b	16 (23)	.26*
Currently aiming at a position in EAA two or more steps above present one	10 (8)	19 (12)	14 (20)	–
Aiming for a position three or more steps above present one in EAA in ten years' time	14 (10)	29 (17)	21 (27)	.19†
Considered 'opportunities for promotion' to be 'very important' to them	15 (12)	36 (23)	25 (35)	.24*

Note: The numbers in brackets are the absolute numbers. χ^2 (with correction for continuity) was used to test the level of significance.

† $p > .10$; * $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

level of ambition. Lastly, a substantially larger proportion of men than of women felt that ‘opportunities for promotion’ was a very important aspect of work for them. There were no significant differences in levels of ambition by grade or by having dependent children.

Turning to the interview material, Veronica’s account of her career ambitions and path illustrates how EAA women can lower their ambitions. Veronica has a Grade B job and she is married with three children under seven years old. She described herself in the questionnaire survey as ‘not very ambitious’.

I need to travel overseas to do the recruitment. Five years ago I really had to travel a lot to do the recruitment. It was nearly non-stop. Then I found that I really had no time for the family. My husband wasn’t happy at that time. [Now] my major task is at home and taking care of the children and office hours in Hong Kong are no problem but, if I need to travel, sometimes I have to stay over the weekend and he’s the only one to take care of the family. He [is not] happy at that moment but for me, I like to travel. I negotiate with my husband. Sometimes I travel. That makes me happy. Other times I will try to give it to other colleagues so I will be in Hong Kong and be with the family. He’s not happy with me travelling out. It’s dangerous from his point of view. I think he worries about me. . . . We have a dog and cats. We really enjoy family life. (Veronica)

In summary, for RQ3 it seems clear that some women do continue in EAA’s employment but, after assessing their chances of moving up the organizational hierarchy, they lower their ambitions in anticipation of high work–family conflict if they pursue their careers ardently. Men employees in EAA do not do this to the same extent. This provides another explanation why women in EAA are not moving in greater numbers into Grades C and D and are not moving at all into Grades E and Z. This links to our earlier finding that women with family burdens reported in the in-depth interviews feeling less work–family conflict – they have reduced their stress from the work domain by lowering their career ambitions.

RQ4: To What Extent is Any Stress in Balancing Work and Family Demands Experienced by EAA Ground Staff Ameliorated by EAA’s Formal Adoption of Family-Friendly Policies and Informal Culture, and by the Support of Significant Others in Employees’ Work and Home Domains?

For those women and men who remain in EAA’s employment, we

TABLE 6
Opinions on Usefulness of EAA's Current Benefits by Gender (Questionnaire Survey)

	Women %	Men %	All %	phi
Agree that EAA's maternity benefits are useful to women ^a	91 (53)	—	—	—
Would like to see EAA's maternity benefits enhanced	79 (33)	—	—	—
Agree that EAA's provision of opportunity to work flexitime is useful for women/men ^b	83 (60)	79 (42)	82 (102)	—
Would like to see EAA's provision of opportunity to work flexitime enhanced	84 (42)	64 (18)	77 (60)	.22†
Agree that EAA's provision of opportunity to take compassionate paid leave is useful to women/men ^c	82 (49)	76 (35)	79 (84)	—
Would like to see EAA's provision of opportunity to take paid compassionate leave enhanced	58 (19)	46 (13)	52 (32)	—
Agree that EAA's provision of opportunity to take extended no-pay leave is useful to women/men ^d	80 (49)	68 (32)	75 (81)	—
Would like to see EAA's provision of opportunity to take extended no-pay leave enhanced	46 (13)	58 (19)	52 (32)	—
Agree that EAA's provision of opportunity to job share is useful to women/men ^e	75 (43)	56 (28)	66 (71)	.21*
Would like to see EAA's provision of opportunity to job share enhanced	52 (16)	54 (20)	53 (36)	—
Agree that EAA's provision of opportunity to work part-time is useful to women/men ^f	70 (33)	44 (18)	58 (51)	.27*

Table 6 continued on next page

Would like to see EAA’s provision of opportunity to work part-time enhanced	68 (23)	44 (12)	57 (35)	–
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Note: The numbers in brackets are the absolute numbers. χ^2 (with correction for continuity) was used to test the level of significance.

† $p > .10$; * $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

- ^a EAA female staff members are entitled to 70 days of maternity leave, during which period six-sevenths of staff’s wages are paid.
- ^b EAA allows staggered working hours (flexitime) from plus or minus 15 minutes to one hour at either end of the day, provided that the employee clears with his or her supervisor on the alternative work arrangement. However, for some jobs (e.g. ground staff on shifts and air crew), staggered working hours are not practicable and thus not allowed. In contrast, the degree of flexibility can be stretched if and when the staff members (usually in senior positions) can obtain consent from their managers.
- ^c EAA grants compassionate leave in the case of: (1) death of immediate family members including spouse, parents and children; or (2) death of grandparents and parents-in-law if the staff member is required to attend to funeral arrangements. However, consideration may be given to special compassionate cases other than (1) and (2) above; e.g. immediate family member hospitalized in critical condition. The maximum duration is three working days, subject to recommendation of the head of department. An extra two working days will be given should it be necessary for the staff member to travel out of Hong Kong to and from his or her place of domicile.
- ^d According to the general manager, EAA used to have long extended leave but now those on extended leave are not guaranteed to have their jobs back on their return.
- ^e There is no formal policy for job-sharing at EAA but it is possible to arrange this on an informal basis according to EAA’s personnel director, although we did not come to hear of any cases of job-sharing in our study.
- ^f Again, there is no formal policy for part-timers but a few part-timers were employed at EAA (information from EAA’s personnel director).

now look at what support they are offered by EAA, formally and informally, and to what extent they receive social support from significant others in their lives. We also look at what other support they feel it would be helpful for EAA to offer them.

Opinions on EAA’s family-friendly provisions. Table 6 sets out our questionnaire findings on women’s and men’s opinions on the usefulness for their gender of EAA’s current formal family-friendly practices.¹³ It is clear that nearly all women appreciated EAA’s maternity benefits. For benefits received by both women and men, high proportions of both groups thought that EAA’s provision of opportunities to work flexitime, to take paid compassionate leave and to take extended no-pay leave was useful. Smaller proportions,

but still the majority, considered that EAA's provision of opportunities to job share and work part-time was useful. However, women were consistently more likely than men to consider EAA's provision of the latter two practices useful. The differences between women's and men's opinions on usefulness to their gender of opportunities to job share and to work part-time were significant – the measure of association (ϕ) between gender and opportunities to job share and to work part-time were relatively modest at .21 and .27 respectively. Note that while the women in the questionnaire survey were in favour of opportunities to work part-time and to job share, none of them, in fact, was a part-timer or a job-sharer. Indeed, the personnel management department informed us that there were only a small number of part-timers and that there were no job-sharers at all among EAA's nearly 4000 ground staff. As we discuss later, the availability of affordable domestic help is an important factor in many Hong Kong women's choice of full-time work.

Since the family-friendly policies offered by EAA were limited in scope,¹⁴ we also asked the respondents whether they would like to see the company's current formal family-friendly practices enhanced. The respondents' opinions are also set out in Table 6. The table shows that a large majority of women would like to see EAA's maternity benefits increased, and similarly high proportions of women and men would like to see EAA's provision of flexitime increased. Smaller proportions of the women and men wished to see an enhancement of EAA's provision of paid compassionate leave and extended no-pay leave, and opportunities to job share and work part-time.

Desire for additional family-friendly policies at EAA. Given the small range of family-friendly practices enjoyed by EAA employees, we also asked the women and men in the questionnaire survey what other family policies they would like their company to provide. Given the Chinese cultural context of our study, we included questions on the respondents' opinions on the usefulness to their gender of the introduction of subsidies and counselling for care of elders. We tempered questions on additional benefits with others, asking the women and men if they thought EAA could realistically afford to introduce each benefit.

Table 7 shows that most respondents felt that the introduction of all of these benefits would be useful to their gender.¹⁵ Nearly three-quarters of men would like to see EAA introduce paternity benefits.

TABLE 7
Opinions on Usefulness of Additional Benefits by Gender (Questionnaire Surevy)

	Women %	Men %	All %
Agree that it would be useful to men if EAA introduced paternity benefits	Not asked	73 (35)	NA
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce paternity benefits	Not asked	62 (20)	NA
Agree that it would be useful to women/men if EAA introduced adoptive parental benefits	63 (29)	73 (30)	68 (87)
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce adoptive parental benefits	41 (16)	44 (12)	42 (28)
Agree that it would be useful to women/men if EAA introduced childcare subsidies	75 (41)	78 (38)	76 (79)
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce childcare subsidies	42 (19)	50 (15)	45 (34)
Agree that it would be useful to women/men if EAA introduced on-site childcare	66 (37)	67 (28)	66 (65)
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce on-site childcare	44 (20)	55 (10)	41 (30)
Agree that it would be useful to women/men if EAA introduced elder-care subsidies	76 (41)	68 (32)	72 (73)
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce elder-care subsidies	43 (19)	36 (10)	40 (29)
Agree that it would be useful to women/men if EAA introduced elder-care counselling	63 (31)	60 (26)	62 (57)
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce elder-care counselling	37 (16)	48 (13)	41 (29)
Agree that it would be useful to women/men if EAA introduced work–family counselling	66 (38)	Not asked	NA
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce work–family counselling	55 (25)	Not asked	NA
Agree that it would be useful to women if EAA introduced women-only training courses	58 (33)	Not asked	NA
Agree that EAA could realistically afford to introduce women-only training courses	58 (34)	Not asked	NA

Note: The numbers in brackets are the absolute numbers. There were no significant differences by gender.

About two-thirds or more of both women and men agreed that it would be useful for their gender if EAA introduced adoptive parental benefits, childcare subsidies and on-site childcare, subsidies and counselling for care of elders, and (asked of women only) work-family counselling. Less popular was women-only training courses (asked of women only).

Table 7 shows that respondents did not, in the main, feel that EAA could realistically afford to introduce all of these additional benefits. However, male respondents clearly felt that EAA could afford paternity benefits – this was one of the most popular benefits, as we saw earlier, and men's desire for it fits with the level of work-family conflict expressed by the men interviewees. Also, note that over half of women thought that EAA could afford to introduce women-only training courses – though this was a less popular additional benefit.

These results show that the respondents thought it would benefit them if EAA were to increase its portfolio of family-friendly practices. At the time of the interviews, EAA had slipped into the red after many years of profitability and there were rumours of redundancies. This may have had an impact on the respondents' assessment of EAA's ability to afford these benefits.

Opinions on supportiveness of EAA's informal culture. Turning to informal support at work, the interviewees were asked to give their opinion on the extent to which EAA's work culture supports women working. The interviewees were asked to give their views on three statements.¹⁶ The women's and men's views are summarized in Table 8 – the interviewees' names in italics are those who had one or more dependent children. For the first statement, 'At my place of employment, employees who put their family or personal needs ahead of their jobs are not looked on favourably', Table 8 shows that both women and men were split in their opinions. Of the 14 women with clear opinions on this statement, seven agreed and seven disagreed, and those women with dependent children were a little more likely to agree with this statement than those without. For the nine men with clear opinions here, four agreed and five disagreed – agreement and disagreement for men were not strongly linked to having dependent children.

For the second statement, 'If you have a problem managing your work and family responsibilities, the attitude at my place of employment is: "You made your bed, now lie on it!"', Table 8 shows that

most women disagreed with this statement: ten disagreed, whereas only five agreed. The group agreeing with the statement contained proportionately more women with dependent children than the group disagreeing. The men were even more likely to disagree than the women to agree with this statement: out of the eight men with clear opinions on this statement, only two men agreed whereas six men disagreed – agreement and disagreement for men were again not strongly linked to having dependent children.

For the third and final statement, ‘At my place of employment, employees have to choose between advancing their jobs or devoting attention to their family or personal lives’, Table 8 shows that the women were split in their opinions: seven agreed with the statement and eight disagreed. Women with dependent children were more likely to agree with this statement than those without. In some contrast, men were more likely to disagree with this statement: out of the nine men with clear opinions on this statement, only three agreed whereas six disagreed. Again, agreement and disagreement for men were not strongly linked to having dependent children.

We add here a number of quotations from our in-depth interviews in order to illustrate our findings. The first set of three quotations is representative of those who thought EAA’s informal culture was supportive of family responsibilities. First, we listen to Martin’s response to the first statement; second, to Jenny’s response to the second statement and third to Veronica’s response to the third statement. Martin and Jenny are local Chinese, as is Veronica. Martin has a Grade C job and Jenny has a Grade D job. Both Martin and Jenny are married but neither has any children. We met Veronica above: she told us about her low level of ambition, her three children and her love of family life.

[This statement is not] true. I have known cases where this sort of situation has happened, and I don’t think [employees] have been looked on unfavourably because they have put their family matters first. (Martin)

I don’t agree with that. It’s not the case. We care very much about our staff problems at home. If some staff have a family problem, we care very much about that. (Jenny)

I can’t see the extreme in my workplace. We are balanced. The team members are okay with people who have family. Even my boss has children also. She works hard in the office but she spends time with her children at the weekend. I can’t see that we have a contradictory standpoint in the office. Maybe we are all females; we understand the needs of each other. If I can’t do the travelling, other people can take it up. (Veronica)

TABLE 8
Opinions on the Supportiveness of EAA's Work Culture for Those with Family Responsibilities by Gender (Interview Survey)

	Women Agree	Women Disagree	Women Unclear/ Don't Know	Men Agree	Men Disagree	Men Unclear/ Don't Know
At my place of employment, employees who put their family or personal needs ahead of their jobs are not looked on favourably.	<i>Maisie</i> <i>Angela</i> Suzie <i>Dorothy</i> Linda Grace <i>Amy</i>	Helga <i>Katie</i> Jenny <i>Veronica</i> Melanie Bridget Renee	Lianne	Lennie Mike David William	<i>Dennis</i> <i>Martin</i> Edward Richie Robert	Darren <i>Jimmie</i> <i>Stevie</i>
If you have a problem managing your work and family responsibilities, the attitude at my place of employment is: 'You made your bed, now lie on it!'	<i>Angela</i> Suzie <i>Dorothy</i> <i>Linda</i> <i>Grace</i>	Helga <i>Maisie</i> Lianne <i>Katie</i> Jenny		David <i>Jimmie</i>	<i>Dennis</i> <i>Mike</i> Edward Richie <i>Stevie</i> William	Lennie <i>Martin</i> Robert Darren

		<i>Veronica</i>			
		<i>Melanie</i>			
		<i>Bridget</i>			
		<i>Renee</i>			
		<i>Amy</i>			
At my place of employment, employees have to choose between advancing their jobs or devoting attention to their family or personal lives.	<i>Maisie</i>	<i>Helga</i>	<i>Mike</i>	<i>Lennie</i>	<i>Martin</i>
	<i>Angela</i>	<i>Lianne</i>	<i>Jimmie</i>	<i>Dennis</i>	<i>Stevie</i>
	<i>Suzie</i>	<i>Katie</i>	<i>William</i>	<i>David</i>	<i>Robert</i>
	<i>Dorothy</i>	<i>Jenny</i>		<i>Edward</i>	
	<i>Linda</i>	<i>Veronica</i>		<i>Richie</i>	
	<i>Grace</i>	<i>Melanie</i>		<i>Darren</i>	
	<i>Bridget</i>	<i>Renee</i>			
		<i>Amy</i>			

Note: Italicization denotes interviewee had one or more dependent children. Jason, Danny and Harry were not asked these interview questions.

The second set of two quotations is from interviewees who found EAA's informal culture not supportive of those with family responsibilities. We listen to Linda and Grace's responses to the first statement. Linda is local Chinese and has a Grade C job; she is single and refers in her response to the position of a colleague that she discussed earlier in the interview. We included another quotation from Grace; she had one young child and we heard from her earlier about her high level of work-family conflict.

I agree with that actually because the incident or the person that I was describing before who has a family and her kids are going to primary [school], she often has to leave on time or take leave to study with [her children]. The image that she gives to her colleagues would be that she is a family woman rather than a career woman. (Linda)

I strongly agree on this. I would say the role models of senior persons have no family, are single or have no kids. (Grace)

Experience of work and home support. From the questionnaire survey, we have information on respondents' childcare arrangements and, from the interview survey, on interviewees' support from significant others in their work and home domains. In terms of work and home support systems, we concentrate, in the interests of brevity, on the support for their work and family roles received by those interviewees with one or more dependent children.

Table 9 sets out the questionnaire survey's findings on the childcare arrangements enjoyed by respondents with dependent children. This table shows a clear distinction between women's and men's childcare arrangements. For women, having a domestic helper was the most frequent childcare arrangement: 67 percent of female respondents with dependent children had a domestic helper, compared to 44 percent of men in a similar position. However, the measure of association between gender and having a domestic helper to care for dependent children (ϕ) was relatively modest at .23 and the difference was only suggestive. For male respondents with dependent children, their most frequent childcarer was their wife: 52 percent of these men indicated that their spouse was a childcarer, compared to 4 percent only for women with dependent children. This difference was highly significant and the measure of association (ϕ) was relatively high at .54. Other sources of help with childcare were relatives (27 for women and 12 percent for men) and, for women only, a nursery (8 percent).

TABLE 9
Childcare Arrangements by Gender (Multiple Responses Possible)
(Questionnaire Survey)

	Women %	Men %	All %	phi
Spouse	4 (1)	52 (13)	27 (14)	.54 **
Nursery	8 (2)	0	2 (4)	–
Relative	27 (7)	12 (3)	20 (10)	–
Maid	67 (18)	44 (11)	56 (29)	.23
Other	4 (1)	0	2 (1)	–

Note: The numbers in brackets are the absolute numbers. χ^2 (with correction for continuity) was used to test the level of significance.

† $p > .10$; * $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

Turning to the in-depth interview material, we asked our interviewees about the tangible and emotional support for coping with their double burden of work and home responsibilities that they received, in the work context from their immediate supervisors, work colleagues on their own level and their subordinates, and in the home domain from their spouses, parents, children and other relatives and friends. Reviewing the findings for those interviewees with dependent children, it was apparent that both women and men enjoyed a high level of tangible and emotional support from others, both in their work and home lives.¹⁷ All of the men concerned received strong support from at least one significant other in their work domain and from at least one significant other in their home domain; and all but one woman received a similar level of support. Further analysis of these interviewees’ responses indicated that while both women and men reported similar strong support in the work domain, women’s support in the home domain was stronger and involved a wider range of people. Indeed, while men gave rather terse answers to these questions, women often spoke at length about the support that they received from others such as their sisters and friends.

We include some quotations from the interviews to illustrate these points. We begin with comments on the degree of support for coping with work and family burdens received from others in the work domain. The first is from Dennis, who is British and Grade D; he is married with two children under seven years old. Dennis was

ambitious for his career at EAA and saw himself as getting to the very top before he retired. He reported receiving strong support from his immediate supervisor and colleagues. The second quote is from Danny. He is local Chinese and Grade B; he is married with two children aged seven and 15 years. The third is from Maisie, who (as we saw earlier) had achieved a good balance between her work and family roles. She was almost as ambitious for her career at EAA as Dennis; she expected to move up to Grade D in two or three years' time and then hoped to progress beyond that. It is worth noting here Maisie's reservation, frequently expressed by the women interviewees, on talking to male supervisors about family problems.

I mean generally people in [EAA] have a fair amount of autonomy in these issues [needing time off from work for family reasons] and throughout the organization people are sympathetic to that kind of pressure. As an organization, people are very conscious of the family: in fact the company is like a family so it's not a problem at all. [Regarding colleagues] again it's a company where you know there is a lot of socializing, a lot of time spent outside work with people from work because people tend to stay a long time, so you get to know each other quite well. (Dennis)

It depends on if it is quite urgent. If it's urgent, they will help you, but of course if it is not urgent they might think about the workload first, because if they help me it might affect some other guys in our section because most of our guys are [from] Hong Kong, they miss their family, the same as me for example, my daughter two years ago had an operation so I just talked to my boss so they let me back to Hong Kong to look after my daughter. [Colleagues are helpful.] We are friends . . . the people we work in the same section or same department, so if you have got any problem just talk to them, if they are OK then they will swap the duty with you, it's no problem. Anything, if you need anything, just talk to them. (Danny)

I think I get that sort of support from my superior. If I want to have a day's leave at the very last minute, 99 percent of the time he will grant that to me. I think [about] work-related problems, yes I can talk to him. If you're talking more about family problems, I don't want to tell my superior. I would want to talk to someone like my mother. [Regarding colleagues] yes, I think if you are on the same level it's easier to make friends so I regard the same level of my colleagues as friends. I can ask them about my son's teeth or which school is a good school. (Maisie)

Turning to responses to the interview questions on extent of support in the home domain for coping with work-family conflict, we give some examples of the strong, all-round support that women

with dependent children received in their home domain. We hear first from Katie, who is local Chinese and Grade B; she is married, and has one child under seven. Note that she received strong tangible and emotional support *inter alia* from her parents, even though they lived in Singapore. The second quote is from the well-balanced Maisie and focuses on the support she receives from her wider family. The third is from Grace who (as we saw earlier) has one young child and experiences a high level of work–family conflict: this quotation focuses on the much needed help she received from her sisters and mother.

[Receives tangible help from husband?] Yes. He does. When he comes home from work, he just pays attention to our daughter, he just plays with her and showers her with lots of love, and does some reading and writing with her. [Discusses her work problems with spouse?] Certainly I can do that, yes. Communication is no problem. And like sometimes I have a problem at work, I'll just bring it up with him. No problem, he'll give me a direction. They [parents] are not [here], they are in Singapore, but we are very close. I think my family do give me very good tangible support in the sense that week-ends if I want to go away, they come and pick her up. . . . They actually help me with a lot, like you say, childcare. [Emotional support?] Very much, we're like . . . a very close family. [Talk about work problems?] Anything, yes. . . . Friends, yes. I have support from friends, and from relatives. My sisters, they will come over. . . . Sisters and friends. In fact, I have a lot of good friends in Hong Kong . . . like if they know any time I have no family coming over, and me and my husband need to be away, they will actually come and be with my daughter, they will very kindly come. (Katie)

[Tangible help?] My parents . . . they are very supportive. Whenever say on a Sunday I want to go somewhere else, I can drop my son at my parents' place and he will be taken good care of. [Emotional support?] Yes. They're proud of me. Just like any parents. [Other support?] Yes. My sister is also very close to me. I have close friends living nearby. I haven't done it before but if I leave my son with my friend, I would not see any problem. My sister's child is always with me and my son is always with her. (Maisie)

My eldest sister, who comes in to teach the maid to work because when I have a new maid I do not have as much time because I use all my annual leave to teach the maid. She can still not do the work properly. My eldest sister comes to my home and teaches her for some weeks, also before when I did not have a maid, my mother and my other elder sister helped me a lot. We used to have dinner at her house. (Grace)

While many women with dependent children stressed the support they received from their husbands, men in a similar position

appeared to receive less support from their wives. Three male interviewees made particular reference to their wives' lack of experience and capability as reasons why their wives could not offer them support in their work roles. A quotation from Lennie illustrates this point. Lennie (as we saw earlier) has two dependent children and experiences high work-family conflict.

[Support from spouse?] Not really but sometimes I will share a little. She is not in a working situation, sometimes you share some of your difficulty, she may not really understand fully what has happened but usually I can share doubts or what I am not happy about. (Lennie)

In summary, we feel we can put together a coherent answer to RQ4. The stress that women and men in the study at EAA experienced in balancing work and family demands appeared to be ameliorated at least to some extent by EAA's adoption of family-friendly policies and by its informal culture. Thus, both women and men were generally of the opinion that EAA's family-friendly benefits were useful for their gender. However, we should note that both groups felt that they would like to see these benefits enhanced and they would like EAA to give them additional benefits, although they worried whether EAA could afford additional benefits in the economic climate at the time of the study. And, while opinions were often divided, there was a distinct tendency among the interviewees to believe that EAA's informal culture looked favourably on those who paid attention to their family responsibilities. However, this belief appeared to be stronger among men, while women and those with dependent children seemed less sure that EAA's informal culture made sufficient allowances for those with family responsibilities. The women's and men's work-family conflict also appeared to be ameliorated by help of various kinds. The respondents seemed to be well provided for in terms of domestic help, although women were much more likely than men to utilize the services of a domestic helper for childcare, men being more likely to rely on their spouses. And both women and men with dependent children appeared to have strong support from significant others in their work and home domains. However, it was clear that women with families had networks of support in their home lives that were both wider and deeper than those of similar men.

Concluding Discussion: Comparison with Work-Family Conflict in the West

We turn now to consideration of RQ5 ‘How do the answers obtained from our RQs 1, 2, 3 and 4 compare with those of studies published in the West of women’s experience of work-family conflict and its impact on their organizational careers?’ We undertake this comparison with particular reference to the three differences between women’s lives in western countries and in Hong Kong as set out in our introduction. Our preliminary point, however, is that our study of EAA establishes that work-family conflict is experienced by employees in Hong Kong, reinforcing Aryee’s assertion that work-family conflict is a universal phenomenon and not solely a western one (Aryee, 1992: 833).

In terms of the first difference between western countries and Hong Kong that might be expected to affect experiences of work-family conflict, we begin by looking at the impact of cultural differences on the role of women at work and in society, and the impact of that role on women’s ambitions in their work lives. Our study of EAA ground staff reveals that women do not progress into the middle and higher grades nearly as much as would be expected, given that 65 percent of EAA’s employees based in Hong Kong were women, and that this lack of progress is linked to women’s experiences of work-family conflict. We found that those ground staff women who do progress into Grades C and D are as likely as similar men to be married but less likely to have children. While both women and men, but particularly women, are more likely to feel that competing work and family demands hold back women’s careers, it is men with family responsibilities who appear to suffer most from work-family conflict. Thus, we suggest that work-family conflict leads some women with family responsibilities to drop out from EAA employment before they reach Grades C and D, while men with similar family burdens continue to climb the organizational hierarchy. It is interesting that Yang et al. (2000: 120) found that Chinese men reported more work-family conflict than Chinese women. Note also the comment by Chiu (1998) on the unavoidable incompatibility between work and family roles for Chinese men, given the very strong emphasis in Chinese society on men’s careers and success. Further, our analysis of women’s ambitions in EAA, as compared to those of men, suggests that some women lower their ambitions and do not seek promotion in

anticipation of the difficulties that they might experience in balancing work and family demands when holding a Grade C or D post. This provides another explanation of why there were smaller proportions of women in Grades C and D and none in Grades E and Z. In contrast, studies of work–family conflict in the West suggest that women suffer more from work–family conflict than men, that this impedes their career development and that, although it often causes them to lower their ambitions, they tend to remain in the workforce to a greater extent (Hall and Richter, 1988; Ferber and O’Farrell, 1991). Thus, cultural values appear to play a role, suggesting that Chinese women’s greater responsibility for the care of family members and domestic tasks, and their fewer expectations for a career, may account for their higher quit rate.

Turning to the second difference between western countries and Hong Kong that is likely to impact on women’s lives – societal emphasis on equal opportunities – we feel that the aspect of this most relevant to our study is public concern for equal opportunities for women reflected in company awareness of the difficulties women face in combining work and family. While companies in the West are not paragons of virtue in providing family-friendly practices for their staff, EAA’s provision of such practices was smaller than would be expected for a ‘flagship’ company in the UK or USA (Zeits and Dusky, 1988; Hall and Richter, 1988; Gonyea and Googins, 1992). We argue that EAA’s slim provision of family-friendly practices could be a reason why women with family responsibilities drop out of EAA employment or lower their career ambitions. The emphasis placed by women and those with dependent children on the barriers in EAA’s informal culture to women reaching high organizational levels is familiar from western studies (Collinson et al., 1990; Coe, 1992; Lewis, 1996; Simpson, 1997; Wajcman, 1998; Travers and Pemberton, 2000).

We turn now to the third and final difference between western countries and Hong Kong likely to impact on women’s lives: the level of support from other family members and the availability of paid domestic help. Our study shows that both women and men in EAA’s employment appear to have strong support from significant others in their work and home domains, although women appear to enjoy a stronger and more widespread support in their home lives than do men. This degree of support for working women appears even stronger than that found in western studies (Greenberger and

O'Neil, 1993; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994). The strong support experienced by our EAA interviewees is mirrored by similar strong support from husbands found by Matsui et al. (1995) in Japan, and from colleagues, supervisors, friends and families found by Lu (1999) in Taiwan. The availability of affordable domestic help appeared to make a difference in the lives of women working for EAA – it was noteworthy that none of the respondents in the questionnaire survey was a part-timer or a job-sharer. However, the Hong Kong lifestyle feature of having a live-in domestic helper and the strong support typical of Chinese families and social groups do not appear sufficient to alleviate women's childcare and domestic burdens, nor allow them to overcome cultural barriers to their career ambitions. Thus women's rise up the management hierarchy in EAA is limited.

Our case study research has begun to fill the gap in understanding work–family conflict in an East Asian region such as Hong Kong. However, our study has its limitations. It was of only one company and, within that company, we were able to survey only one section of its staff. We were also unable to undertake any longitudinal comparisons of EAA and we were not given access to any of its ex-employees who might have quit its employment due to intolerable work–family conflict. Additionally, our focus was on work–family conflict and its relationship with gender, marital and family statuses, level of ambition, informal work culture, the organization's family-friendly policies, and degree of social support. Pressure of space meant that we did not report any findings on the impact of managerial decisions on women's careers at EAA. On the positive side, however, our in-depth approach towards surveying work–family conflict added a welcome quality of richness to our data. Our adoption of a case study approach allowed us to link employees' experience of work–family conflict to organizational practices and culture. And, finally, our investigation of employees' desires for more family-friendly practices and of their opinions on the helpfulness of informal attitudes towards those with family responsibilities offers suggestions as to how EAA – and other Hong Kong companies – could improve conditions for those of its employees with such burdens, both women and men; it also gives pointers to any attempts to change organizational culture.

Notes

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1. See the summary of much of the existing material on women's difficulties in East Asia in reaching managerial levels in Adler and Izraeli (1994).

2. While EAA originally gave us permission to study cabin crew and air crew, this permission was subsequently withdrawn: at the time of the study EAA was very concerned over its relations with these groups.

3. The Code of Practice on Employment under the SDO covers an extensive range of HRM aspects.

4. Managerial decisions/approaches identified by western studies as inhibiting women's careers include organizational sex-typing and the unequal valuing of women's skills (Schein, 1975, 1994); the existence of gendered organizational practices (Martin, 1993); women's receipt of a lower level of supervisor mentoring and support (Marshall, 1984); and male senior managers desiring and having the ability to limit women's access to executive positions (Izraeli and Adler, 1994).

5. Note that the collection of gender statistics is not routinely undertaken at EAA. Table 1 was compiled at our request and there are no data available from earlier years to demonstrate whether women have been making significant progress in EAA, either up the hierarchy or into traditionally male-dominated professions such as maintenance engineering.

6. Some male in-depth interviewees did not give us the full interview time that we had requested and we had to forfeit some of the questions in their interviews.

7. At the interviewee's request, we took notes during one interview rather than a tape-recording.

8. The average age for men in Grades C/D lay within the 36–39 age group, while the average age for men in Grades A/B lay within the 30–34 age group. Using the *t*-test, this difference was highly significant (.001 level).

9. The average age for women in Grades C/D lay within the 30–34 age group while the average age for women in Grades A/B lay within the 25–29 age group. Using the *t*-test, this difference was highly significant (.001 level).

10. Note that 14 out of these 15 men had stated earlier, in response to the questionnaire, that they were very or moderately comfortable in balancing work and family demands.

11. Note in Table 4 that fewer women with families were selected for in-depth interviews, reflecting the smaller number of women at Grades C/D with families in the questionnaire study.

12. The women interviewees' response to the questionnaire survey's question on the assessment of their degree of work–family conflict was more congruent as a group with their answers in the interviews: 13 out of 15 women interviewees had reported themselves to be very or moderately comfortable in balancing work and family demands in the questionnaire survey.

13. When we controlled for having/not having one or more dependent children, there were no significant differences between women and men respondents in agreeing that EAA benefits were useful to their gender and in wishing that EAA should enhance these benefits.

14. EAA's provision of flexitime, in particular, appears limited: see note b in Table 6.

15. When we controlled for having/not having one or more dependent children, there were no significant differences between women and men respondents in feeling that EAA's introduction of additional benefits would be useful to their gender and in feeling that EAA could realistically afford these additional benefits.

16. These statements were taken from Bond et al. (1997). By chance, they happened all to be negatively phrased but this was explained to the interviewees.

17. The names of those women and men interviewees with dependent children are set out in Table 4.

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